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Add Bonn

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## Add Bonn

Add Bonn recalls life in the San Francisco Mission District, where she was born and raised from 1911 through the 1930s, and her subsequent years (through the present) in the Russian Hill/North Beach Districts.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Name Adrienne Bonn  
(First) (Middle) (Last) (Maiden)

Address 832 Green Street San Francisco 94133  
(Street) (City) (Zip)

Date of Birth 1911 Place of Birth San Francisco

Name Date and Place of Birth Date and Place of Death

### GRANDPARENTS:

Adrien Robin 1838-Basses Alpes, France 1903-San Francisco

Fredericka Foos 1847-Wahlstein, Germany 1923-San Francisco

Sylvain Bonn Metzervisse, France 1903-San Francisco

Sara Levy 1849-M.Moselle, France 1919-San Francisco

### PARENTS:

Estella Robin 1875-San Francisco 1971-San Francisco

Achille Bonn 1875-Alsace Lorraine, France 1921-San Francisco

### SIBLINGS:

• Helen 1901-San Francisco 1960-San Francisco

Sylvan 1905-San Francisco 1984-Oakland

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PROJECT: TELEGRAPH HILL DWELLERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

NARRATOR: Add Bonn

INTERVIEWER: Alison Frantz

INTERVIEW DATE: July 10, 2001

TRANSCRIPT DATE: November 4, 2001

TRANSCRIBER: Barbara Frantz

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[Interviewed in her home at 832 Green Street where she has lived since 1939, artist Add Bonn recounts her early years in San Francisco's Mission District where most of her neighbors were of European descent. She attended Mission High during its reconstruction after it had been destroyed by fire, and participated in the Girls' Club, which at that time was located on Capp Street between 18th and 19th Streets.

- She tells of her experience as a student at the California School of Fine Arts (now the Art Institute) studying under well known artists of the 1930s and 40s such as Otis Oldfield, Nelson Poole and Spencer Macky. She reports on details of the curriculum as well as the social events such as the Parilias --



all-night parties that were not inhibited by Prohibition laws.

Before 1971 when Add Bonn retired to become a full time artist, she had been employed for 42 years at Metropolitan Life Insurance Company at 600 Stockton -- now the site of the Ritz Carlton Hotel. The company was known by the employees as “Mother Met” because of the extensive employee benefits programs -- a medical dispensary with a doctor and nurse if you were ill on the job, a commissary which provided warm free lunches as well as coffee and snacks for coffee breaks, and social activities and clubs for after work.

Add Bonn also makes reference to a number of present and past North Beach landmarks: Rossi’s Market, The Gold Spike, The Black Cat. Some of her paintings include scenes of North Beach and Telegraph Hill and the Bay. She has exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Palace of the Legion of Honor, the De Young Museum, the Oakland Museum and the Richmond Art Center.]

ALISON FRANTZ: I am interviewing Add Bonn at her home at 832 Green Street in San Francisco and I’d like to start with some biographical information. Where were you born?



ADD BONN: San Francisco. In the Mission District, on Capp Street between 19th and 20th.

ALISON FRANTZ: Which hospital were you born in?

ADD BONN: I don't think I was born in a hospital. That was a couple of years ago! I don't think any of my siblings were born in hospitals.

ALISON FRANTZ: How many siblings do you have?

ADD: I had a brother and a sister. But they are both deceased. I see their children; in fact, I have inherited their children.

ALISON: Have you lived here in San Francisco all your life?

ADD: Yes, I have lived here all my life.

ALISON: When did you move to North Beach?

ADD: I moved to North Beach in 1939. I had a flat on Jones and Chestnut, and then later moved here to Green Street. We could see Treasure Island and the 1940 World's Fair from our kitchen window.

ALISON: Were you going to school at that time?

ADD: No, I was [still] living at home [Capp Street] when attending art school. I was working for Metropolitan Life, so after work, I went to the Mission District for dinner and then I would go to art school, then back home after



school using street cars and cable cars.

ALISON: Did you go to school every night?

ADD: No, it was three nights a week, but it was wonderful! Not that I learned so much about art, but it was just the experience of going to art school.

ALISON: Were there many women who went to art school?

ADD: Oh yes, I'd say about a quarter of them were women.

ALISON: Where was the art school located?

ADD: The California School of Fine Arts, which is now San Francisco Art Institute, is located at 800 Chestnut at Jones, right over there.

ALISON: You mentioned that you lived at home when you went to art school.

ADD: Yes. In fact, our address was 440 Capp Street, and I lived at home until I got married and then I moved to Chestnut and Jones. Then we moved up here [Green Street] and I have been here ever since. That was in 1940 that I moved up here.

ALISON: Do you remember anything about your house on Capp Street?

ADD: Oh, yes! First of all, my grandmother [Fredericka Foos] and grandfather [Adrien Robin] [on her mother's side] came to California in the 1850s and 60s. They married. I don't know how they met, but they married





and they lived on 4th Street and Clara Street. My grandfather had a liquor store on 4th Street and all of the wines and liquors were imported from France in barrels. Of course this was before they had vineyards in Sonoma and Napa. It was not a saloon because they did not sell by the glass. Every time the barrel of port was empty, Grandpa accused Estella [Stella], my mother, of having drunk it all. My mother did not drink! And he was also a veterinarian. Doctor to the San Francisco fire horses. Of course they called him Doc Robin. He married my grandmother who was German and they had four children. Then the family moved out to the Mission District, which was country. It was a two-story house with a balcony around it. The air was so pure my mother and her sister had to take turns napping in the afternoon. It was the last house to burn in the fire and earthquake...at least the last house to burn in the Mission District. Then they rebuilt; it was a bungalow, a seven-room bungalow they built after that. Mr. Wilhelm was contracted and it was quite a nice house.

One of my grand uncles (who did not live with us) lived with an Indian woman named Kypee who, I am told, would sit in the corner of the room and grunt as a means of conversation. They lived together for many years and he only married Kypee three weeks before he died. They had no children. Another grand uncle married a lady, half Indian, half English. Another grand uncle went back to France.

ALISON: Did your parents come from another part of the United States?

ADD: My father [Achille Bonn] came directly from Alsace Lorraine, France. On my mother's side, my grandfather [Adrien Robin] came from Basses Alpes, a part of France. He took a boat trip around the Horn, took six







Grandmother Rica holding Add, 1912  
(known as *Kleinschen*)  
440 Capp Street, Mission

months to get here from Europe. My grandmother, my mother's mother, named Fredericka Foos, came from Wahlstein, Northern Germany. Her father was a mosaic worker. Why Nana came to the United States is unknown to me. Then she came across the United States six days after the transcontinental railroad was running; it took sixteen days to go across the U.S. She left two sisters behind and told them she would send for them when she was settled. One night she was in bed and woke up with a start thinking that her sisters had arrived. She got dressed and went to meet them. Sure enough, they were there. How is that for mind power! Anyway, my grandparents met here in California. Somehow Sonoma comes to mind. My grandfather once courted one of General Vallejo's daughters.

My mother was born here in San Francisco in 1875. She was the oldest of four and she married Achille. Now Achille used to walk up and down 4th Street. Cesarine, my mother's sister, saw him and suggested that my mother marry this dapper looking man. Of course my mother took one look and said she would never marry that frog, which was slang for Frenchman. However, that frog became my father. My mother married Achille in 1900 and exactly nine months later gave birth to Helen [Add's sister]. Four years later along came Sylvan (Syl) and then me, also known as Kleinschen (little one).

ALISON: So your father was from Alsace Lorraine? He was from that border area between France and Germany

ADD: Yes. Depending on the year, sometimes they were Frenchmen and sometimes they were Germans. As a matter of fact, on my birth certificate, it says that my father was a German. He certainly wasn't, he







Sylvan Bonn in front of family home, 1910  
440 Capp Street, Mission



was French!

ALISON: Your last name is "Bonn" so they probably assumed it was German.

ADD: But it's not, it's French.

ALISON: What was your house like at 440 Capp Street?

ADD: It had a flight of stairs on the outside. The house was set back on a 40 foot lot. There was ground cover and flowers on the left and then you turn left and you turn right and there was the front door and you went in and there was the living room, bedroom, second bedroom, kitchen way in the back, and a big backyard. It was ideal! The house is still there. That's where I was born. That was in 1911. My mother had the seven-room bungalow made into two four-room apartments after my grandmother died.

ALISON: Did your brother and sister live there?

ADD: Yes, until they got married. My sister and brother were born in the previous house, which was destroyed in the 1906 fire.

ALISON: Did they watch you go to art school in North Beach?

ADD: No, they were out of the house by then. My sister had gone to art school and liked it very much. My brother did not. But he could have, as he was a natural talent for pen and ink. But he did not develop it. You know, when things come too easy to you, you are not interested.



ALISON: And where did your sister go to school?

ADD: Girls High and then California School of Fine Arts.

ALISON: So she went before you?

ADD: Oh, yes! She was ten years older than I.

ALISON: What did she study?

ADD: I have no idea what she studied. But she said she had a good time! That's where I went. I had a good time too! It was a good experience! It was wonderful! I have been painting ever since.

ALISON: Did you have a separate studio when you started painting?

ADD: No, I was a Sunday Painter until I retired [from MetLife]. And that was thirty years ago that I retired. And now I have a flat table that I use. I'll show it to you when we finish.

ALISON: What was the art school like at that time? Was it like it is now?

ADD: It was nicer! Well, it wasn't as big, they've built additions to it. It was smaller and thus more intimate. Of course, I thought it was great! We used to have Parilias, that was a costumed art ball once a year. And it was just great! [laughs] It would be at the big auditorium or some big place. There was always a theme because the art school spent months getting ready for it. It was just a lavish affair. One time everyone was wearing "bones." It was fun.



People would spend months designing costumes and making them. It was the highlight of the school year. Lucien Labaudt was the head of it. He was a dress designer; short, with a French mustache.

ALISON: What were some other themes?

ADD: Greek, Roman, and Oceanic.

ALISON: Was it always men and women?

ADD: Oh, yes!

ALISON: And everyone dressed up?

ADD: For the Parilias? Oh yes, you wore a costume. It was an all night affair. It was great!

ALISON: Did you have to bring an escort or a date?

ADD: Yes and no, you went with the school, you know, as a group. I know I was supposed to come in, and I still don't know to this day, if I was supposed to come in before the elephants or after the elephants. [laughs]

ALISON: Who were the "elephants?"

ADD: A parade into the room, the auditorium. Different groups came in: Night School, Day School or how many sections they had. I don't remember any of that. It was during Prohibition and quite an affair.



ALISON: So, it was during Prohibition, so did they have any, sort of illegal...?

ADD: It was all illegal, whatever we had, yeah.

ALISON: Did any of your friends live near the campus?

ADD: No, I don't think so.

ALISON: Did they have any kind of dorms at that time?

ADD: Oh, no, no, I think they still don't. It was just a school. Did you ever go to the school?

ALISON: I've walked through the school.

ADD: Then you know.

ALISON: And so your sister had gone to the school before you? And she was ten years older?

ADD: Yes.

ALISON: So, she told you all about it.

ADD: [laughs] I don't know if she did. I knew she had gone. You know ten years older, you don't spend much time talking to your little sister!







# *San Francisco Art Association*

*Founded 1871*

*Chestnut and Jones Streets, San Francisco*

May 10th, 1945,

*Madam:*

*I am instructed to advise you that on the date above written, at a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Association held at its office in the California School of Fine Arts, you were unanimously elected to membership.*

*It is hoped you will avail yourself of the privileges to which your membership entitles you and that you will take a personal interest in the activities for which the Association is organized.*

*Very respectfully,*

*For the Board of Directors,*

*Louise D. Ackerman*

*Secretary.*

*To* Adrienne Bonn,  
832 Green Street,  
San Francisco, California.

ACTIVE ARTIST Member

ALISON: What was your favorite class, if you remember?

ADD: Well, in those days you started with antiques. And they had these Roman plaster of Paris reproductions of antique forms (heads, hands, arms, feet, etc.) and you just copied them, you know, learned to reproduce them on paper. You just went on and on until you got to the point where they would say, "Why don't you go on to the next class," which would have been perhaps Life Drawing Sketch Class. From there you went into Painting Class, or you took Commercial Art, in some kind of progression.

One thing of importance: when I was going to Art School, the measurement of success was whether or not you became a member of the San Francisco Art Association. This was comprised of exhibiting artists. You could not be considered for membership unless you had exhibited with them for three or four years. When they had a show, everyone could bring their canvas to the Museum of Modern Art (which at that time was located on Van Ness Avenue). Of course they were juried, and that determined whether or not you exhibited. When you were accepted to exhibit as a member, it took you out of the amateur class and made you feel like a pro -- at least you had earned your stripes. Then when the Association exhibited anywhere you could enter a painting to be shown with them. It was a group show that allowed me to show at the De Young, the Palace of Fine Arts, the Museum of Modern Art, The Legion of Honor and the Oakland Museum. Unfortunately this group has not existed since World War II.

ALISON: What were the rooms at the school like where you had to draw?

ADD: As they are now. We had stools, you straddled them and at the end of





SAN FRANCISCO ART ASSOCIATION  
CALIFORNIA SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS  
CHESTNUT AND JONES STREETS  
SAN FRANCISCO 11

Miss Adrienne Bonn

832 Green St

San Francisco 11

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it was a small easel and you put your pad against that. And there were some standing easels.

ALISON: And they had light coming in through the ceiling?

ADD: There was lots of light, I am sure.

ALISON: Like open skylights?

ADD: It was at night!

ALISON: Oh, at night, that's right.

ADD: I don't know what kind of illumination they had but we could see all right. We had models.

ALISON: Live models?

ADD: Yes, that is after we got to that class, we had models.

ALISON: Would that be a couple of hours working with the models?

ADD: Oh, yes! I think it was from seven to ten. I went there seven years! Yeah, at night. I had to work in the daytime in order to afford to go at night. But it was a great experience! Loved it!

ALISON: And how was your work during the day at Metropolitan Life?





ADD: I was just a clerk. It was very uninteresting! But eventually, by the time I retired, I was the head of the Design Department. And I was doing interior designing. We did what no one else would do. It was an interesting job! I had three other people in the department, there were four of us. We worked on district offices and even remodeled interiors for the Head Office, which is where The Ritz is now, that was the Metropolitan Building -- 600 Stockton between California and Pine. We also did flower arranging, Christmas decorating, and lobby displays for conventions. That was the Head Office for the Pacific Coast. It was a wonderful company to work for. We had free lunch served every day. We had medical care. We had a small hospital in the building, a tremendous view because downtown was not built yet. You could see the Bay, it was wonderful!

ALISON: What years did you work there?

ADD: 1929 to 1971, 42 years in all. I graduated from high school in 1928. Made a lot of good friends. I don't know a thing about insurance after working for all those years. It was a wonderful company!

ALISON: Are you still in contact with people from the Company?

ADD: Yes.

ALISON: Do they live in San Francisco?

ADD: A couple do. Most of them live in Marin and on the Peninsula. A lot of people have migrated out of the City -- it is so expensive now. Things just worked out that way. Some got married and their husbands lived out of town,



some of them moved there, circumstances!

ALISON: Were there any other school social activities that you did?

ADD: Well, yes, there was The Girls' Club! Now the Girls' Club was founded by Rachel Wolfsohn. When Rachel died, her sister, Eva Wolfsohn, took over. Rachel had this Girls' Club. Just girls became members. Later on, they had a Mothers' Group and you couldn't become a member of the Mother's Group unless you had a daughter in the Girls' Club. And, again, it was a wonderful organization! Eventually, there was a fire which burned down part of the beautiful building located in the Mission District. The original address was 262 7th St. I was only one block away when the building was on Capp Street, so I spent all my time there. My mother was a member, my sister was a member. We had a stage. We learned ballet. We had gym. Remember Mrs. Helman, from the banking family? They gave us the Gymnasium, right next to the Girls' Club building. And then the Fleishhackers gave us the Country Club, down at Emerald Lake. So it was a wonderful thing!

ALISON: What sort of things did you do beside ballet? Did you ever have to do community service?

ADD: No, it was instructional. We had an auditorium. Around the top of the auditorium was a balcony. The balcony had little rooms in it. And so, on Tuesdays, which was the Girls' Club afternoon, we had a class in each of the little rooms -- learning to darn or construct boxes with ribbon-tied corners or learning to weave. It was just a great, great organization! We had a big painting by Gottardo Piazzoni in the auditorium. And we had a stage, it was great! We had drama classes, dance and piano recitals, and choral groups.







Photograph of the Summer House in the back of 440 Capp Street, 1914  
Grandmother Robin holding Add



1987 Show  
Add, with her Painting "*Summer House*"

ALISON: So, you were young when you saw the painting by Piazzoni. Did you like it at that time?

ADD: Oh, yes! It was just there, it was a beautiful thing and there were other paintings. We had beautiful things. The building, itself, was designed by Bruce Porter. He was a great designer! So, we had the best of everything.

ALISON: What ages were you when you were involved in that Club?

ADD: Well, I was a member before I was born. Eva Wolfsohn touched my mother's stomach and said, "She's going to be a member!" [laughs] And that was it. The group was all the women in the neighborhood. They had luncheons, they had dinners with guest speakers, that sort of stuff. It was a wonderful background.

ALISON: Did any of those women encourage you to go to art school?

ADD: Yes. Mrs. Sloss gave me a scholarship to art school for six months.

ALISON: When did you start doing your own work? What happened after going to art school?

ADD: I wanted to be an architect. But I didn't go to college so that fell through. But, I was always interested in architecture. I even had a letter of introduction to Julia Morgan, the architect for Hearst Castle. And I met a woman in a design group, who was a wood carver. She wanted to buy this little antique store. She said, "I'll buy the antique store if you will do the





designing. I said, "What designing?" She said, "The interior designing." I said, "I don't know anything about it." She said, "You know all about it."

So, I really did know most of the answers to designing. Then I worked on Saturdays, at Macy's, to learn about fabrics. I did that for a while and that's hard work, those big bolts. Then at the office, Henry North, who was the Vice President of the Pacific Coast office, knew I painted. Any time he saw me in the halls of the office, he said, "How's the painting coming?" And we talked for a few seconds.

So, I went to this woman, who was the Employee's Counsel and said, "I'd like to take my vacation half days because I am getting a few customers from the antique store." She said, "Well, you know we are only supposed to take a week at a time. Your vacation should not be split up." But she said, "Let's go find out." So, we went to find out if I could take half days. So, that was great.

Then they were going to put a new wing on. She said, "Why don't you see if you can't be the designer for the new wing." I said, "Oh, don't be silly. I am just a clerk around here. They will never accept me as a designer." She said, "Well, try it."

So, we made a date. We went to see Henry North. We walked in. He said, "What's going on?" The Employee's Counsel said, "Add wants to ask you something." So, he said, "What is it, Add?" I said, "I understand you are going to put a new wing up and you will need a designer." "Great! Wonderful! You've got the job!" That was it! He did not ask me if I could do it, the training that I had, nothing! He just acquiesced immediately. So, I got the job and I had it for



years. But it was great. I loved it. It was a good fight with somebody every day. [Laughter] I did that up until I graduated from MetLife and retired.

ALISON: What were some of the projects you worked on?

ADD: Well, it seemed that every time we got a new vice president, they had to have their office redone. They couldn't move into an office that someone else had occupied. Everything was new in that office. So, that was one thing. Then we designed big areas, like the Claim Area that had to be redesigned. A lot of the wood furniture had been brought over from the East. We positioned everything correctly. So, it was wonderful! It was great!

ALISON: What kind of colors were you using at that time, in the beginning? Or was it wood?

ADD: The desks were wood in the beginning, shipped out from the East. They were big, bulky things. Then they went into steel, gray steel. All the offices were gray. The floors were brown. It was a good job, great job! The main thing was getting along with people. Because they kind of resented any change.

ALISON: Were there people who were happy to have things changed?

ADD: Well, yeah, a new desk, that was nice! [Laughter]

ALISON: Did you run into arguments every day, maybe because they had their own ideas?



ADD: Yes, for example in every petty office, they had the same pictures, the same faces of the four top men at the office. So, there you are. I said, "Why don't you take those faces down and put up some paintings, pictures?" Oh, NO! I couldn't do that. If they came in here and did not see their faces, they would feel insulted. So, those were some of the things. They all kowtowed to them. They had no budget for paintings, so I would buy books, art books, or calendars or something and free frame them, mat them. I used the previous frames. So, they looked good. Yeah. Nobody knew the difference. [Laughter]

ALISON: Did they ever get paintings in there?

ADD: No, never did, no.

ALISON: What kinds of art books and things did you use?

ADD: Coffee table books, just nice books. One was Ansel Adams.

ALISON: Things like sculpture, a picture of sculpture, a scene?

ADD: Whatever they liked. I gave them a choice of preselected things. They might say, "Do you have something else?" I would find something they liked.

ALISON: Did they tend to be kind of modern or did they like landscapes?

ADD: Not modern! They were old fashioned, "stick-in-the-muds."

ALISON: Would they like a painting to go with their couch or something like that?



ADD: Only the boss had a couch, no one else did. For instance, we had an attorney who came out from the East. I talked to him on the phone. He said, "Anything you want to give me will be fine." So, I did his office with his permission because he had said, "Oh, that will be fine." I had more trouble with that man than anybody else! We painted the office light green. Soft green and then I put in a blue chair. "My God! Why would you put a blue chair in a green office?" He was absolutely furious about it! He tried to change it. I said, "It is brand new, why do I have to do it over again?" "Just do it over again!" And that was it.

ALISON: What did he resolve after that? Do you remember what it was?

ADD: A green chair. Then he complained about the carpet. "That was a bedroom carpet and it's wearing out under my desk!" No appreciation.

ALISON: Did you find people that would really appreciate your work?

ADD: Oh, yes! Well, most were my friends, you know, because we did a lot of chatting back and forth.

ALISON: Did they ever have you do things in their homes?

ADD: Once in a while the boss would ask me a question about their homes, but I would not do the whole thing, no. You had two bosses.

ALISON: That's great! What were the years you were doing this?





ADD: [big sigh] I don't know. Oh, I know, it was after the War. After the War because we had women doing desk work. When the men went to war, the women took over the men's jobs. When the War was over, the men wanted to come back, so the women were pushed out.

ALISON: So, the women had no jobs?

ADD: Well, we had jobs but not jobs we were used to, they found a place for us. So that happened. During the War, I wanted to go into a certain department. And they said, "Oh, we can't put you into that department." "Why not?" I said, "You just took somebody off the street and put them in there. Why can't you put me in there?" "Oh....." [laugh] So, I got in that department and I liked it very much! I liked the whole thing. The people were your friends. The bosses were nice. We used to call it "Mother Met." Yes, which it really was, they took care of you.

ALISON: What was that department, that you wanted to get into?

ADD: Some kind of accounting. Computers were just coming in. Half the work was that we had to balance what the agents sent in, their reports, and all that sort of stuff. We didn't handle any money, just the bookkeeping department.

ALISON: So, they let you come in?

ADD: Other women came in, too.

ALISON: Then going back to when the men came back from the War, what



were the kinds of positions they would take back?

ADD: Whatever job they left! Whatever they wanted practically.

ALISON: So, they were guaranteed to have these jobs. What would the women do after that?

ADD: Well, they would fill in temporarily here and temporarily there until they got relocated again. As a matter of fact, one interesting thing is that at the beginning of the Depression, we had a Mr. Williams, who had a meeting, a fifth floor meeting. We had a beautiful fifth floor. He stood on the stairs, which ran up to the sixth floor. We all gathered in front of him on the fifth floor. He said, "Boys and girls, I want you to go home and tell your parents you have a job and you will have a job." And that was it. Because everyone else was losing theirs, you know. So, that was a wonderful thing, we had a job! Because in those days you did not get paid very much, but you had a job.

ALISON: What was a general salary?

ADD: I started at sixty dollars a month. I think I finally got to sixty-five, that was great! [laughter] We were satisfied.

ALISON: Would you be able to live on your own with that salary?

ADD: At that time? Oh, sure, yes.

ALISON: And so you were living on your own?



ADD: I was with my mother in the Mission District.

ALISON: And your brother and sister were both married?

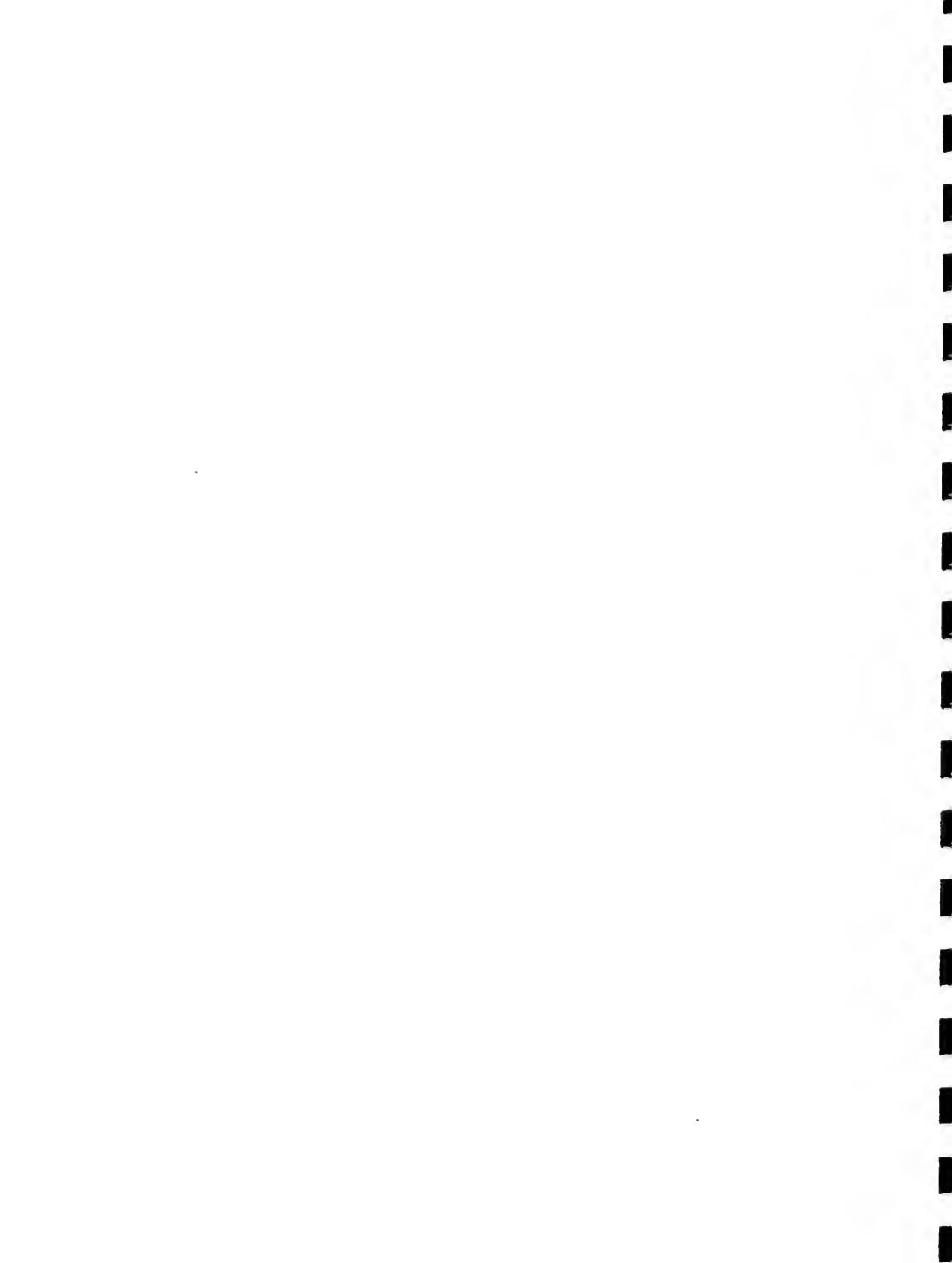
ADD: Yes, my sister was living someplace else in the Mission District and my brother, I think he was still with us ... don't remember.

ALISON: Was the Mission District being built-up a lot during that time?

ADD: Not particularly. We had a main street, which was Mission Street; the library was on Bartlett and 23rd and I went to Horace Mann [school]. First, I went to Agassiz, which was the primary school, then I went to Horace Mann, which was an old wooden building with great big wide halls – all wood. Well they tore that down and built a new one, and that was great. Then I went to Mission High. Mission High burnt down and they built a new high school and while it was under construction we were in half-day school in the temporary quarters (which were like boxcars!), which were in the park, right there near the school. We went half-days; it was great. You know, I don't know what they're complaining about these days. Then we graduated from this new building, I think we were the third class in the new building. It was great, brand new building.

In those days, there were horse-drawn carriages and wagons. The "rags-bottles-sacks-man" had a wagon. He would go around buying just about anything -- mostly rags, bottles and sacks.

ALISON: What's a half-day like?



ADD: Swell. You have the other half-day to do what you want. [Laughter]

ALISON: So it was just... you go to school in the morning until about twelve?

ADD: Yeah. And then somebody else will go in the afternoon.

ALISON: Oh, so you would switch off, there would be two groups.

ADD: Yeah. In order to accommodate all of us.

ALISON: And then what would you do in the afternoon with your time?

ADD: Oh, play tennis maybe, or do something else.

ALISON: And they had tennis courts at this school?

ADD: We had tennis courts in Mission Dolores Park. It was great.

ALISON: And so you... did you call your friends to play tennis?

ADD: Yeah, we just swept in and if there was someone else waiting to play, we played, yeah. Because the Mission was a smaller neighborhood, and the nice part for instance, on Capp Street, if you said where you're from...they didn't say New York or Chicago, it was Czechoslovakia, Russia, Poland, Italy, Mexico, they were all from different parts of the world, and it was great. No fights, no arguments.

ALISON: And even though they were from those countries, were they









*North Beach, 1940*  
22x28, oil

speaking English?

ADD: Oh yes, they all learned to speak English. Except when I came over here to this district [North Beach] I had a neighbor who would not learn English, she was Italian, only spoke Italian.

ALISON: Oh, so you didn't become friends.

ADD: No. You see, it wasn't that way in the Mission, we were all nice.

ALISON: And when did you move here to North Beach?

ADD: I think in about 1939. And then my husband and I separated the day of [the bombing of] Pearl Harbor [December 7, 1941], which is a great day for separation, and his cousin moved in. Then she moved in with her sister in 1944 and Leah and I have lived here ever since. Leah just died last year....was it last year?....yeah, last year November....November 30th, 2000. Leah Selix.

ADD: At that time [during the War] my brother was married and had his own place and my sister was married and had her own place, and my mother still stayed on Capp Street.

ALISON: Did she have someone to take care of her, or were you with her?

ADD: No. I took care of her.

ALISON: And how did you travel from here over to....



ADD: Streetcars.

ALISON: Streetcar? And where would it stop? Were the rails the same as they are today?

ADD: Well, there was the Mission Street streetcar and then there was the number 24...you could go all over the city in a streetcar. No buses, just streetcars. When I was going to art school I'd take the Mason Street cable car, get off and walk up the hill, and when going home just the reverse. As a matter of fact there was a brake-man on the cable car who would wait for us! [Laughter]. He knew when our class was over. But, you know, people were more...they knew each other better. There were not so many people. None of this...bad stuff.

ALISON: Yeah, bad stuff, in the neighborhood you mean?

ADD: Yeah, mmm-hmmm. You know, they took time to talk to you and to know your families.

ALISON: So, did you know your grocer?

ADD: Oh, of course.

ALISON: Where did you get groceries?

ADD: You mean, in this district? Ollie's store. We had a grocery store right at the corner of Green and Mason and we got most of our things from him.



There was a delivery boy. And I can't remember, I'm sure Safeway was also there and we would go down there too.

ALISON: The Safeway, was it down in the Northpoint area?

ADD: No, not Northpoint, it was, it was where that new unit is, where they built all of those houses down there. You can see the red roof. The old Safeway was there on Chestnut and Taylor.

ALISON: Okay, I see, I see. Okay. So did you go to the grocer...the little store more than you did Safeway?

ADD: Oh yes, more convenient. You just passed him on the way home. Very tiny store, but he had everything, 'course he had back rooms, too.

ALISON: Back rooms?

ADD: Where he would go to get something for you.

ALISON: Oh, okay. A storage room.

ADD: Yeah. Right. Yeah.

ALISON: Was there anything special that he carried that other stores wouldn't have?

ADD: Ah, during the War he had meat under the counter...which, you know, you couldn't get beef during the War.





ALISON: Where did he get it?

ADD: We never asked. Yeah. Not a lot, but if he knew you, you know, you could buy some from his store.

ALISON: And what about eggs and...

ADD: [sigh] I don't know where they came from.

ALISON: But they had eggs.

ADD: And of course from Metropolitan I walked home, you know, I'd pass other stores.

ALISON: What other kinds of stores were there?

ADD: Well, the nice part about Columbus Avenue is we had a hardware store, we had a place you could buy shoes, a drugstore, small restaurants (one per block), Rossi Market at Vallejo and Columbus....it was a village. Now it's all restaurants [pause] which I resent. But it was, you know, it was nicer...in the old days. In the Mission District, there was Twin Peaks Chinese Laundry. When I was about ten years old, Charlie, who was Chinese, would pick up our laundry and deliver it. He was so nice. He would say to my grandmother, "You look worried....you need money?...I'll lend you money." You trusted people. You had friends around all of the time.

ALISON: What was the shoe store like? Did they have ladies' and men's



shoes?

ADD: Yes. And we would go downtown...it was easy to get downtown then, you know...you'd go downtown to do most of your shopping. There was the White House Department Store where they sold yardage, books, clothes. I bought a lot of books there. There was Hales at 5th and Market and the Emporium on Market. O'Connor Moffits used to be where Macy's is now. Across from Macy's was City of Paris. Then Sears used to be out at 29th and Valencia, I think...way out. That was when big department stores had moved into town, early on, [pause] but uh, things were small scale [pause] which was nicer, oh yeah [pause] more intimate.

ALISON: Did they have a Women's Club in North Beach when you were living here?

ADD: They may have. We all went to Girl's Club, you know.

ALISON: Oh, so when you were living here you would continue to go to the Girl's Club [in the Mission] from here?

ADD: Yes, yeah, yeah.

ALISON: Did any of the students from art school go with you?

ADD: No. One of them was in the Girl's Club but not because...she just happened to go to art school too. No connections.

ALISON: What other kinds of stores were there on Columbus that you liked?







*Washington Square Park, 1982*  
18x24, acrylic  
(In the collection of Judith Gamba)

ADD: Uh, [pause] I think there may have been one bank, I don't know, ah, just different.

ALISON: Would people sit outside and talk to each other?

ADD: No, no. You had the park where they would meet and talk, or you'd sit on the front steps...But we didn't have street tables.

ALISON: Oh, really?

ADD: Oh yeah. That was a no-no.

ALISON: A no-no. How come?

ADD: Well, it was against the law to put a table on the street. You had a place to walk. Nowadays, you have to walk around the tables to walk down the street. If there are two of you, there's no room, you walk a single file...and you wait for the guy going in the other direction before you can go.

ALISON: So you liked it better when it was a clear street.

ADD: Of course, yes. I don't know why they have to do that [laughter]. You know, the automobiles park in front of the tables and give off exhaust. It's ridiculous. The wind is blowing... [pause]

ALISON: Was there a nice restaurant that you liked to go to around here?





ADD: We used to go to the Gold Spike, which is still on Columbus Avenue and it was inexpensive. One time we went to a restaurant, and I think it had something to do with sailors and canaries, and for twenty-five cents you got a full dinner. Now, isn't that hard to believe?

[Note: Add is probably referring to the Canary Den on Drumm Street. In her memoir Laughter on the Hill, (1945, McGraw Hill) Margaret Parton writes:

"Half an hour later we found ourselves on the way to the Canary Den on Drumm Street. Our taxis wound through the dark streets near the waterfront, and I recognized the section as the produce district where, in a few hours, farm wagons would unload their crates of lettuce and artichokes, the dusty roosters would flutter and fuss in the chicken-wire cages, and the occasional rotten cantaloupe would be tossed in the gutter, splitting as it rolled. Now the only spot of light came from the basement level windows of the Swedish restaurant, known throughout San Francisco as the only place where you could get a seven course dinner for twenty-five cents.

Apart from the yellow canaries and the white rabbits in a long glass case down the center of the room, the place was the nearest I had come to shipboard since I walked down the gangway of the *West Wind*. The coffee came in thick white mugs, and the food was equally sturdy. By calling each item on the menu a separate course it really did come to a seven-course dinner, and it really was a quarter a dinner. The long tables were filled with tanned men in blue jeans, sailor jackets, and little knitted wool caps. Swedes with bright hair and heavy accents, silent Lascars with drooping mustaches, wizened limeys and ruddy boys



from Wisconsin sat shoulder to shoulder, not talking, shoveling in the meat and potatoes with incredible speed and glancing with indifference at us."

ALISON: When was that?

ADD: Maybe before the War...World War II, yes. And food was inexpensive. The Gold Spike was very good and that wasn't very expensive. The last time I had dinner there, which was fifty years ago [laughter] my napkin kept sliding off my lap and I'd pick it up and put it on my lap again, and pretty soon it would disappear again. Finally, I realized there was a cat down there. And the cat would grab the napkin and pull it down, and I don't like cats, I really don't. So, I pulled away and told the waitress, "There's a cat under the table" and she said, "Oh, just give it a kick." I could no more kick a cat than I could pet it, you know. So that was the last time I went there and it's been there ever since.

ALISON: The cat?

ADD: The restaurant.

ALISON: Oh, the restaurant! [Laughter]

ADD: I should have said *kill* the cat. [Laughter] Lots of old restaurants.

ALISON: Did they have a bar like they do now?

ADD: Yes.



ALISON: Did you know the owner of the restaurant?

ADD: No. [pause] Then there were other restaurants in the area. The Gold Spike was where we used to go; and Joe's on Broadway. Oh, and then there was the "Black Cat", which, ah, I think it's a gallery now. It was originally a gay bar, but I never knew it. Even when we had a class, an art class, upstairs on the second floor. We just went through it and up the steps to the room where we had the class. So, that was kind of fun. Just knowing that we went there, was fun. But we didn't have any activity there.

ALISON: Do you know what street that was on?

ADD: Yes, the Black Cat was at the beginning of Columbus on Montgomery.

ALISON: Where Columbus meets Montgomery to go down to the financial district?

ADD: Yes. The Canessa Building [708 Montgomery Street] was the old Black Cat. Now I think, it's a private art gallery upstairs and a café and bakery on the ground floor.

ALISON: So, you had an upper room and you could go in? Did they have a live model for the students?

ADD: No, we worked with a model at school. As a matter of fact, Nelson Poole was a teacher we had at art school. A group of us liked him so much that we asked if he would give us some extra time. So he used to come over



there and then, you know, maybe a half-dozen of us would go, and he would work with us. Nelson Poole was a wonderful painter, at least I liked him, but he never became famous. And that was the same time period as Otis Oldfield, Spencer Macky, Constance Macky, Lucien Labaudt and Lee Randolph.

ALISON: And what kind of art did they do?

ADD: Oils. Acrylics had not been invented yet. It was always oils. Otis Oldfield has a panel up at Coit Tower and the other day I was at the Beach Chalet and all the people's portraits are in those frescoes.

ALISON: And the other woman, there was a woman...

ADD: Constance Macky and Spencer Macky; husband and wife.

ALISON: And were they painting in the '20s?

ADD: Yes and they were both teachers at the Art Institute. Everybody said, you know, "She's a better artist than he is" [laughs]. I don't know why they said it.

ALISON: And they were teaching at the school? Did you ever help them with the class?

ADD: No, I was in the class. I had Otis Oldfield... he was cute [laughter], very short man, had a pipe. I remember his telling us how he burnt his hand one time with a book of matches. Spencer Macky used to give lectures on art history and the only thing I ever remember him telling us was about his





necktie. [laughter] You didn't learn very much. It was more osmosis than anything else. Yeah. Maybe they were teaching and I just didn't absorb it, I don't know.

ALISON: I think you did, since you were doing design and...

ADD: Yeah, well, designing was on my own.

ALISON: Did you like painting?

ADD: I like designing best.

ALISON: If you had tools to design, what would you be using?

ADD: In those days, you used a t-square and a triangle. That was it. And a slide rule and a scale ruler.

ALISON: And, pencil or pen?

ADD: A pencil. And if you had to make a blueprint of it, then you'd do it in pen when it was reproduced.

ALISON: How did they reproduce it?

ADD: Well, they had a machine that just took a picture of it, and out came a blue piece of paper with white lines on it.

ALISON: Did that take a long time?



ADD: Oh yeah.

ALISON: And that was during the time you were working, I suppose. What year?

ADD: It could have been anywhere from 1930-on. I don't know when they stopped doing it. They still have blueprints, but I imagine now it's bigger machines, better machines, you know, computer maybe, I don't know.

ALISON: Going back to when you were working at MetLife, you said computers were just starting to come in?

ADD: Yes, yes. We had a computer, as big as this...half the size of....from this wall to that wall, that was the computer. And they put in panels that were wired, you know, and you knew how to wire them in order to get...something on the other end would come out, on a paper, you know, kaplunk, kaplunk, kaplunk, kaplunk... that was it. Then they would take that out and put another panel in...out the other end came another kaplunk, kaplunk, kaplunk, kaplunk. To think that now you can hold [a computer] in your hand...yeah, it's just amazing.

ALISON: Was it noisy?

ADD: Yes. Well, there was a noise, but it wasn't too noisy. Maybe we had two of them.

ALISON: Did you see computers reduce in size or, how did that work?



ADD: Well, I got to the point where I designed a computer room and it was a special floor that was elevated so there was air underneath it and then, ah, it was practically sterilized, and then the computers were put in. Of course, by that time, they were much smaller, maybe like the size of a record player or something. You could not drink coffee in there or anything. It had to be really clean.

ALISON: So, when you designed it you had to work around the computer.

ADD: No, you worked with the computers. I designed the room for them. It was interesting. It was a special room. It was more like an operating room with special air.

ALISON: What was the lunchroom like?

ADD: Oh, the lunchroom was a cafeteria. You just went up and they had a choice of two or three entrees and you got coffee, milk, or tea, or chocolate milk if you wanted it, maybe, and then they had an entrée and a vegetable, salad and dessert, you know, for free! It was wonderful! The best food you could buy. And of course some clerks, you know, didn't like that.

Then after I got the decorating job, I had lunch in another room. Not the private dining room, which was where the big wigs would go -- a lovely room, but the middle room. There we would be served on white tablecloths, white napkins; people served us, and we had a printed menu....

ALISON: Every day?



ADD: Every day, yes.

ALISON: That's amazing.

ADD: We made a selection and they brought it to us....Oh yes.

ALISON: Did you ever have a chance to eat with the bosses?

ADD: Ah, I think perhaps on an anniversary or something, I had lunch with them....it was more fun in my room.

ALISON: Did you get to decorate that room?

ADD: Yes.

ALISON: And design it?

ADD: Yes. I think it turned out pretty well.

ALISON: What did you choose for decorating?

ADD: I remember in the officers dining room they wanted redwood panels and a sort of folding door that they could open up and have a larger room or close it off for a more intimate room. Redwood is so soft, they made the mistake, but they never admitted it. And ah, the draperies went with that tone, it was nice. So did the carpet...oh, incidentally, I have a sample of that carpet downstairs, the first carpet they ever did in wool, where it's a





mixture. And I thought, you know, it's got something like salt-and-pepper. It was manufactured just for us and so, I'm proud of that.

ALISON: And the redwood, wasn't that scarce at the time?

ADD: No. I don't think so.

ALISON: Didn't they have any laws against cutting redwood?

ADD: No. No. It was the same as pine or oak or anything else. As a matter of fact, these black verticals here in my living room are redwood and, I think, 1957 we put those in and we had to bring those up from Los Angeles.

ALISON: How old is this apartment?

ADD: The building was put in during 1907.

ALISON: So you remodeled the whole building?

ADD: Piece-meal. Not all at the same time. I was always looking in decorating books, designing books. We had three of the nicest trees out there. We had to do away with them when we put in the garage. Thank goodness we have a garage. The garage was put in in 1994.

ALISON: Now we're downstairs in the studio and this is a large, well-lit room with many paintings on the walls.... original paintings, and did you design this table?







*Telegraph Hill, 1976*  
26x32, acrylic

ADD: My grandnephew did. Isn't that a great table?

ALISON: It's a wonderful table. It's a large wood....

ADD: Watch [banging noise]. It goes up.

ALISON: Do you use a crank?

ADD: There's a crank right here, there's a wheel and it goes up. So whatever height I want it, I can have it.

ALISON: And this is about, five feet?

ADD: 48" x 48". And the wheels, they lock. Beautiful table.

ALISON: And this painting has Sts. Peter and Paul Church in it and Coit Tower

ADD: That's Filbert Street.

ALISON: Filbert. So, you had a very clear view of North Beach.

ADD: Oh, it was great. It was right outside the window.

ALISON: And how long did it take you to do that painting?

ADD: About six months.

ALISON: This is another church in North Beach, Our Lady of Guadalupe?



ADD: Yes. Nice church.

ALISON: Did you ever attend church there?

ADD: No.

ALISON: And are there actually buildings on the side?

ADD: Uh, yes.

ALISON: Well this is a beautiful painting and it looks like it's isolated in one place.

ADD: Yes, doesn't it. This was the flat we used to rent, 830 Green Street. Now it's a studio.

ALISON: Do you give slide shows?

ADD: If somebody is interested in a painting, I show them the slides first, and if they see something they like and say, "ooh I like that" then I show them the original.

ALISON: How many slides do you have for that show?

ADD: 140 slides and 340 total original paintings done.

ALISON: So that's about half, or a little less than half of the paintings that





are available which are on slides. I love the Children's Party in a High-Rise.  
What's the story?

ADD: Well, I was looking out the back one night because I'm a great one to look out the window, and before that tree grew up, there was a house behind it. They were having a party with the lights on, so I started painting it.

ALISON: Did you know the people?

ADD: I knew somebody that lived there years and years ago, not those people.

ALISON: And could you see the Golden Gate Bridge in that view?

ADD: No, no.

ALISON: So you put that in?

ADD: Yeah, because the bridge is way out there at the gate, you know... Well, I gave you the idea of a high rise, yeah.

ALISON: Definitely. What's the story about The Candidate?

ADD: Well, I went to a meeting one day and, because I just can't sit and do nothing, so I made a sketch. The wise guy can't see what's going on. He's got the money from the collection basket. The second one is using up his pawns.



ALISON: And he has the patch over his eye and a microphone.

ADD: The poor girl on the right, [laughter] she doesn't have any lips, she can't talk...

ALISON: Right. She has a little...lips on a stick. And they're all dressed in white with a patriotic festoon above them. It makes it political.

ADD: My figures are in white. The reason for that is that it's the color I want to bring up to continue with the background.

ALISON: So you have some wood grain in that, you did some wood graining...

ADD: Oh yeah.

ALISON: Are you interested in Egyptian things? Is that why you did that painting?

ADD: No, no. I did two eyes. One was just a normal eye, and then the Egyptian eye. One was called The Eye and the other would be The Other Eye. The Eye sold, so I still have The Other Eye. [laughter]

ALISON: Do you have any artists who inspired you?

ADD: They all inspired me. This is what I'm working on now. It's called "View from the Top." [laughter]

ALISON: "View from the Top" [laughter], wonderful.







*Saints Peter and Paul and Benjamin Franklin, 1982*  
28x22, acrylic  
(In the collection of Abby Berghalla)

ADD: I haven't developed it, but that's the next thing.

ALISON: So that's a little sketch and then you'll develop it into a large size painting?

ADD: It will be this small, 5x5.

ALISON: It's a woman and her....

ADD: her pork belly [laughter]

ALISON: How do you approach sketching?

ADD: If I go out sketching, I indicate the gradations of brightness on a scale from one to ten. I indicate the colors I am seeing. If I had a camera I'd take a picture of it then, but not in the beginning.

ALISON: Did you go to Yosemite and that area a lot?

ADD: Years ago. Years ago.

ALISON: Did you ever meet Ansel Adams?

ADD: Yes I did. This is Ansel Adams right here. [points to a print]

ALISON: Oh, right here. This was before the bridge was built...





ADD: That's right.

ALISON: Was it 1938?

ADD: I believe it was. We used to go to China Beach. We'd go over there by streetcar, and have a picnic at China Beach and then watch the big navy ships come through the Golden Gate, fuming black smoke...it was wonderful. You don't get that view today.

ALISON: So how did you know Ansel Adams?

ADD: He was a friend of a friend. And one time he wanted somebody to take care of his house in Carmel and he asked us to do that. We went to an opening to introduce Pirkle Jones out in the Avenues. I think Pirkle is a teacher someplace.

ALISON: Yeah, Ansel Adams started teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute.

ADD: Not while I was there.

ALISON: No?

ADD: Oh, maybe in the daytime, I don't know.

ALISON: Oh, could be. Did you ever hear about the cottages that were up on Filbert?



ADD: 1338 Filbert Street

ALISON: Yes.

ADD: [laughter] Sit down.

ALISON: Oh, we'd better talk about that. Okay, so here we go.

ADD: In one of my bios, it mentioned that I was a student of Marion Hartwell...and somebody saw that and went immediately to somebody else and said, "Add Bonn used to study at Marion Hartwell's School of Design." So, she said, "You studied at Marion....." "yes, yes." So I had a little sketch, not a sketch, a photograph of the class. She wasn't in it, but the building was.

ALISON: What's the story?

ADD: Well, they have this garden, and the site...I don't remember any of it, except I was there [laughter] and ah, Marion Hartwell was the teacher. It was a very difficult subject to teach, you know, where you do bands of colors and change the colors and see the differences it made. It was great, just great. I learned a lot. So now they want to take those cottages down and do away with the garden, and all that sort of stuff.

ALISON: Do you know anything about what students were doing there, as far as whether it was co-ed?

ADD: Oh yes, it was co-ed, sure. Before that, there wasn't anything, you know, male or female, you just went, whatever you were. It was a Saturday



class I went to...I don't know if she had one at night. But I don't know anything about her, except her class. And she'd use her hands to try to demonstrate different things, you know. It was great.

ALISON: Do you remember what the room looked like?

ADD: No.

ALISON: So, it was set up as an art studio?

ADD: It was her school set up like a classroom.

ALISON: And how many buildings were there?

ADD: I think there are four or five cottages now, I guess she had one and she lived there.

ALISON: So, do you give shows of your work nowadays?

ADD: When I can. I just had a show at the, at the Pierotti Gallery, it's at the St. Francis Hospital.

ALISON: I'm looking at your resume right now, and see that you were the director, in-house art department, including interior design and color coordination at Metropolitan Life.

ADD: Which we have covered.



ALISON: And that was until 1971, and then after that...

ADD: '71 was when I retired.

ALISON: That's when you retired and then you started showing all these paintings.

ADD: I graduated from being a Sunday Painter.

ALISON: Tell me more about the Mission District.

ADD: The store on 23rd and Mission. Years ago when I was a little girl, if somebody made a sale, they would take this, ah, tube and put the money in and then cover it. Then they'd pull something and it would go across the store up to the second floor, and they would detach it and maybe they'd give you change and then send it back.

ALISON: Really.

ADD: Oh yes. Very, very modern [laughter].

ALISON: That was their form of change machine then?

ADD: Yeah, that's how they made change and that's how they recorded the sale.

[Note: The device Add describes above is known as a pneumatic tube. The use of compressed air and vacuum suction transports a small container





through a tube connected to an office or another area of the building. A form of this is still used today in some large stores.]

I went to the butcher store, or to the grocery store, wherever you went. This one place had vegetables. We didn't have canned goods in those days. It also had a meat section and a fish section. And you'd buy some meat for soup, and he would put in all the vegetables you needed and you'd take it home. It cost less. They did things that way.

Alison: That's so convenient.

ADD: Oh yeah, and generous, too. And in the fish department, he wore straw cuffs that he'd put on his arms to protect his sleeves and then he'd scale the fish....the gills [laughter]...And he was Italian. We had everything.

ALISON: And that was when you lived on Capp Street?

ADD: Yeah. Mr. Scaffidi. He had three or four sons. One of them just died. There was a notice in the paper and I wrote a letter, but they never answered it. And it was a nice letter. One son became a priest, one son was "Babe". They were great people.

END OF INTERVIEW





Add Bonn at home  
832 Green Street, North Beach  
May 2000





